

Maundy Thursday C: John 13:1-17, 31b-35  
Preached at Custer Lutheran Fellowship by Pastor David Van Kley, 4-6-2007

## Object Lessons

The recent worship survey confirmed one thing I already knew: adults really like children's sermons. "I get more out of them than the regular sermon," people sometimes say. I'm not sure that's a compliment to the pastors! But I do understand. Kids make us laugh and open our weary eyes to the truth. And sometimes we are able to **hear** the gospel only when we **see** it. A good object lesson can make a big difference.

Chances are, if you like children's sermons, you like today's gospel. Here, Jesus gives the disciples an object lesson. He takes off his robe, ties a towel around himself, pours water into a basin, and washes the disciples' feet. He says, "I have set an example for you to follow. Do as I have done." Then come the words from which Maundy Thursday gets its name. "I give you a new commandment—a new **mandatum** in Latin—"love one another as I have loved you."

Jesus' object lesson takes the disciples by surprise. If anyone should be washing anyone's feet, **they** should be washing **Jesus'** feet! But Jesus overturns their expectations. And ours.

By washing the disciple's feet, Jesus assumed the role of a first century **servant**. Foot washing was a **servant's** job. And the word "servant" was just a nice way of saying "slave." When Jesus washed their feet, he became the disciple's servant; he acted the part of a slave. He calls them—us—to do likewise.

When I was in Bogota, Colombia, a month ago, I visited our former exchange student, Maria, at her grandmother's apartment. A woman opened the door. She let us in and then disappeared to make coffee and serve us treats. I thought at first that she was Maria's grandmother, but Maria corrected me: this woman was their **servant**. The family barely seemed to notice her. When she brought in coffee, there were no thank you's, only requests for more cream or butter or cheese. The pecking order was clear: the grandmother, the aunt, Maria, and I were the privileged ones, served by this woman without a name.

Was Jesus saying that he would become like this woman, serving people who would not honor his service? Maybe. Was he saying that we should become like her, giving ourselves away in nameless service? Maybe sometimes!

But I think it is more correct to say that Jesus was calling those of us with power to serve those who are without. This is what he did for the disciples and what he asks of us.

Here in Custer, we don't have servants or slaves, but we do have the foreign and domestic workers who fill our plates and pouring our coffee, doing the menial tasks that

no one else wants to do, for the wages no one else will accept.

What would it mean to love these as Jesus loved his disciples? What would it mean to wash their feet? Does it mean leaving generous tips? Putting on a dinner for them at Custer Lutheran Fellowship as the congregation council has envisioned? Working politically for a more equitable world, in which all are valued and receive adequate pay for their labor? Yes. All of that.

What would it mean if you were the governor of South Dakota? Maybe taking off your suit and working for a few days in the fields of a struggling rancher? And if you were the brother of a little sister who adored you? Maybe doing all of her chores one week as a gift? And if you were the pastor of a Church? Maybe swabbing the floors for the janitor or doing the dishes in the kitchen? Yes. All of that. All of us are powerful in some ways and all of us are powerless in others. Jesus calls those with power to serve those without. He overturns expectations.

Father Pedro Claver, a Jesuit missionary from Spain, came to Colombia in the early 1600's. The slave trade was raging in the new world at that time: ships brought Africans to the South American coast, as they would later to North America. The town of Cartagena was the center of the slave trade. There, Father Claver labored among "the least of these." He personally carried the sick and dying from the docks to the hospital. He tended the wounds of the untouchables, those suffering from smallpox and leprosy. He drew attention to the inhumane conditions on the slave ships and in the camps. His writing helped eventually to shut the whole business down. He said, "I would be a slave to the slaves." And he lived among them until he died.

**A slave to the slaves.** Maybe that's what Jesus meant by washing the disciples' feet. Maybe that's who Jesus was! God living among **us** who are enslaved by our own wants and desires. God touching us in those places we think are untouchable with amazing grace and unconditional love. God binding up our emotional wounds. God sewing together the torn fabric of our world. God living among us until he died.

For that's what's coming next in John's gospel. The Jesus who washed the disciples' feet soon was nailed to a cross. Having loved us, he loved us to the end.

The cross is an object lesson, par excellence! The ultimate example of a servant washing the feet of others. A statement of God's love and an example of how to love. In the process of loving us, Jesus set for us an example of how to love. He said, "take up your cross and follow me." Become servants to one another. Become slaves to your fellow slaves. Amen.

*At this point, Pastor Kent and Pastor Dave silently take off their robes, walk out into the congregation with basins, and wash the feet of several people.*